



Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope

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I.

Perverse juxtapositions structure our relation to the Political. This becomes even more apparent and problematic when we consider the position of blacks within this structuring. On the one hand, our Declaration of Independence proclaims, “All men are created equal,” and yet black captives were fractioned in this political arithmetic as three-fifths of this “man.” The remainder, the two-fifths, gets lost within the arithmetic shuffle of commerce and mercenary prerogatives. We, of course, *hoped* that the Reconstruction Amendments would correct this arithmetical error and finally provide an ontological equation, or an existential variable, that would restore fractured and fractioned black being. This did not happen. Black humanity became somewhat of an “imaginary number” in this equation, purely speculative and nice in theory, but difficult to actualize or translate into something tangible. Poll taxes, grandfather clauses, literacy tests, and extra-legal and legal violence made a mockery of the 14th amendment, and the convict leasing system turned the 13th amendment inside-out for blacks. Yet, we approach this political perversity with a certain apodictic certainty and incontrovertible hope that things will (and do) get better. The Political, we are told, provides the material or substance of our hope; it is within the Political that we are to find, if we search with vigilance and work tirelessly, the “answer” to the ontological equation—hard work, suffering, and diligence will restore the fractioned three-fifths with its alienated two-fifths and, finally, create One that we can include in our declaration that “all men are created equal.” We are still awaiting this “event.”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. placed great emphasis on the restoration of black being through suffering and diligence in his sermon “The American Dream” (1965):

And I would like to say to you this morning what I've tried to say all over this nation, what I believe firmly: that in seeking to make the dream a reality we must use and adopt a proper method. I'm more convinced than ever before that violence is impractical and immoral.. .we need not hate; we need not use violence. We can stand up against our most violent opponent and say: we will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you... we will go to in those jails and transform them from dungeons of

shame to havens of freedom and human dignity. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities after night and drag us out on some wayside road and beat us and leave us half dead, and as difficult as it is, we will still love you.... threaten our children and bomb our churches, and as difficult as it is, we will still love you.

But be assured that we will ride you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we will win our freedom, but we will not only win it for ourselves, we will so appeal to your hearts and conscience that we will win you in the process. And our victory will be double.

The American dream, then, is realized through black suffering. It is the humiliated, incarcerated, mutilated, and terrorized black body that serves as the vestibule for the Democracy that is to come. In fact, it almost becomes impossible to think the Political without black suffering. According to this logic, corporeal fracture engenders ontological coherence, in a political arithmetic saturated with violence. Thus, non-violence is a misnomer, or somewhat of a ruse. Black-sacrifice, or a violence directed toward the self, is necessary to achieve the American dream and its promise of coherence, progress, and equality.

We find similar logic in the contemporary moment. Renisha McBride, Jordon Davis, Kody Ingham, Amadou Diallo, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Frederick Jermain Carter, Chavis Carter, Timothy Stansbury, Hadiya Pendleton, Oscar Grant, Sean Bell, Kendrec McDade, and Trayvon Martin, among others, constitute a fatal rupture of the Political; these signifiers, stained in blood, refuse the closure that the Political promises. They haunt political discourses of progress, betterment, equality, citizenship, and justice—the metaphysical organization of social existence. We are witnessing a shocking accumulation of injured and mutilated black bodies, particularly young black bodies, which place what seems to be an unanswerable question mark in the political field: if we are truly progressing toward this “society-that-is-to-come (maybe),” why is black suffering increasing at such alarming rates? In response to this inquiry, we are told to keep struggling, keep “hope” alive, and keep the faith. After George Zimmerman was acquitted for murdering Trayvon Martin, President Obama addressed the nation and importuned us to keep fighting for change because “each successive generation seems to be making progress in changing attitudes toward race” and, if we work hard enough, we will move closer to “becoming a more perfect union.” Despite Martin’s corpse lingering in the minds of young people and Zimmer-

man's smile of relief after the verdict, we are told that things are actually getting better.

Supposedly, the generation that murdered Trayvon Martin and Renisha McBride is much better than the generation that murdered Emmett Till. Black suffering, here, is instrumentalized to accomplish pedagogical, cathartic, and redemptive objectives and, somehow, the growing number of dead black bodies in the 21st century is an indication of our progress toward “perfection.” Is perfection predicated on black death? How many more black bodies must be lynched, mutilated, burned, castrated, raped, dismembered, shot, and disabled before we achieve this “more perfect union”? In many ways, black suffering and death become the premiere vehicles of political perfection and social maturation.

This essay argues that the logic of the Political—linear temporality, bio-political futurity, perfection, betterment, and redress—sustain black suffering. Progress and perfection are worked through the pained black body and any recourse to the Political and its discourse of hope will ultimately reproduce the very metaphysical structures of violence that pulverize black being.

This piece attempts to rescue black nihilism from discursive and intellectual obliteration; rather than thinking about black nihilism as a set of pathologies in need of treatment, this essay considers black nihilism a necessary philosophical posture capable of unraveling the Political and its devastating logic of political hope. Black nihilism resists emancipatory rhetoric that assumes it is possible to purge the Political of anti-black violence and advances *political apostasy* as the only “ethical” response to black suffering.

II. The Politics of Hope

To speak of the “Politics of Hope” is to denaturalize or demystify a certain *usage* of hope. Here I want to make a distinction between “hope” (the spiritual concept) and “the politics of hope” (political hope). The relationship between the spiritual concept of hope and its use as a political instrument is the focus of the black nihilist critique.¹

Following Kant and other post-metaphysical philosophers, the critical field questions (and in some circles completely denounces) a certain spiritual predisposi-

tion to the world—that “unknowable” *noumenon* that limits Reason, but provides the condition of possibility for its organization of the world of perception, *phenomenon*. The problem with the critical questioning of the spiritual is that it often appropriates spiritual concepts and then, insidiously, translates them into the ‘scientific’ or the knowable, as a way to both capitalize on the mystic power of the spiritual and to preserve the spiritual under the guise of “enlightened understanding.” We find this deceptive translation and capitalization of spiritual substance within the sphere of the Political—that organization of social existence through political institutions, mandates, logics, and grammars—as a way to govern and discipline beings. If we think of hope as a spiritual concept—a concept that always escapes confinement within scientific discourse—then we can suggest that hope constitutes a “spiritual currency” that we are given as an inheritance to invest in various aspects of existence. The issue, however, is that there is often a *compulsory investment* of this spiritual substance in the Political. This is the forced destination of hope—it must end up in the Political, and cannot exist outside of it (or any existence of hope “outside” the political subverts, compromises, and destroys hope itself. Like placing a fish out of water. It is as if hope only has intelligibility and efficacy within and through the Political). Put differently, the politics of hope posits that one *must* have a politics in order to have hope; politics is the natural habitat of hope itself. To reject hope in a nihilistic way, then, is really to reject the politics of hope, or certain circumscribed and compulsory forms of expressing, practicing, and conceiving of hope.

In the essay “A Fidelity to Politics: Shame and the African American Vote in the 2004 Election,” (2006) Grant Farred exposes a kernel of irrationality at the center of African American political participation. Traditionally, political participation is motivated by self-interested expectancy; this political calculus assumes that political participation, particularly voting, is an investment with an assurance of a return or political dividend. The structure of the Political—the circular movement between self-interest, action, and reward—is sustained through what Farred calls the “electoral unconscious.” It “historicizes the subject in relation to the political in that it determines the horizon of what is possible’ it maps, through its delimitation or its (relative) lack of limits, what the constituency and its members imagine they can, or, would like to expect from the political.” (217) In this way, the electoral unconscious, as the realm of political fantasy, mirrors the Lacanian notion of fantasy; it maps the coordinates of the political subject and teaches it how exactly to desire the Political.

For Farred, there is a peculiar logic (“another scene”) operating as the motivation for African American participation in the Political. Unlike the traditional political calculus, where action and reward determine civic engagement, African American participation does not follow this rational calculus—because if it did, there would actually be no rational reason for African Americans to vote, given the historicity of voting as an ineffective practice in gaining tangible ‘objects’ for achieving redress, equality, and political subjectivity. African Americans, according to Farred, have an “irrational fidelity” to a practice that, historically, has yielded no concrete transformations of anti-blackness. This group is governed not by the “electoral unconscious,” but by the “historical conscious,” which is the “intense [and incessant] understanding of how the franchise has been achieved, of its precarious preciseness as well as their (growing) contemporary liminality, their status as marginalized political subjects.” (217) African Americans are a faithful voting block not because of voting’s political efficaciousness, but as a way to contend with a painful (and shame-full) history of exclusion and disenfranchisement. Political participation becomes an act of historical commemoration and obligation; one votes because someone bled and died for the opportunity to participate, and “duty” and “indebtedness” motivate this partial political subject.

Within this piece, we get a sense that black fidelity to the Political is tantamount to the Lacanian notion of *drive*—one perpetuates a system designed to annihilate—participation, then, follows another logic. The act of voting, according to Farred, is legitimate in and of itself; it is a *means as an end* (or a means without an end, if we follow Agamben’s logic). The means, the praxis of voting, is all there is without an end in sight. African American political participation is an interminable cycle of reproduction, a continuous practice of reproducing the means of reproduction itself. This irrational fidelity to a means without an end gives rise to “the politics of despair”—representation for its own sake and the apotheosis of singular figures—and a politics without hope:

African American fidelity, however, takes its distance from Pauline ‘hope’—like faith, hope is predicated upon a complex admixture of expectations and difference. In this respect, the African American vote is not, as in the colloquial sense, hopeful: it has not expectations of a shining city appearing upon an ever distant, ever retreating, hill in the unnamed-able future. Fidelity represents the anti-Pauline politics in that its truth, its only truth, resides in praxis. (223)

This brilliant analysis compels us to rethink political rationality and the value in “means”—as a structuring agent by itself. What I would like to think through, however, is the distinction between “hope” and “despair” and “expectations” and “object.” Whereas Farred understands political participation as an act without a political object, or recognizable outcome—without an “end,” if we think of “end” and “object” as synonyms—I would suggest that the Politics of Hope reconfigures despair and expectation so that black political action *pursues an impossible object*. We can describe this contradictory object as the lure of metaphysical political activity: every act brings one closer to a “not-yet-social order.” What one achieves, then, and expects is “closer.” The political object that black participation encircles endlessly, like the Lacanian drive and its object, is the *idea* of linear proximity—we can call this “progress,” “betterment,” or “more perfect.” This idea of achieving the impossible allows one to disregard the historicity of antiblackness and its continued legacy and conceive of political engagement as bringing one incrementally closer to that which does not exist—one’s impossible object. In this way, the Politics of hope recasts despair as possibility, struggle as triumph, and lack as propinquity. This impossible object is not tethered to real history, so it is unassailable and irrefutable because it is the object of political fantasy.

The politics of hope, then, constitutes what Lauren Berlant would call “cruel optimism” for blacks. (Berlant, 2011) It bundles certain promises about redress, equality, freedom, justice, and progress into a political object that always lies beyond reach. The objective of the Political is to keep blacks in a relation to this political object—in an unending pursuit of it. This pursuit, however, is detrimental because it strengthens the very anti-black system that would pulverize black being. The pursuit of the object certainly has an “irrational” aspect to it to it, as Farred details, but it is not mere means without expectation, instead, it is a means that undermines the attainment of the impossible object desired. In other words, the pursuit marks a cruel attachment to the means of subjugation and the continued widening of the gap between historical reality and fantastical ideal.

Black Nihilism is a “demythifying” practice, in the Nietzschean vein, that uncovers the subjugating strategies of political hope and de-idealizes its fantastical object. Once we denude political hope of its axiological and ethical veneer, we see that it operates through certain strategies: 1) positing itself as the only alternative to the problem of anti-blackness 2) shielding this alternative from rigorous historical/

philosophical critique by placing it in an unknown future 3) delimiting the field of action to include only activity recognized and legitimated by the Political, and 4) demonizing critiques or different philosophical perspectives.

The politics of hope masks a particular cruelty under the auspices of “happiness” and “life.” It terrifies with the dread of “no alternative.” “Life” itself needs the security of the alternative, and, through this logic, life becomes untenable without it. Political hope promises to provide this alternative—a discursive and political organization beyond extant structures of violence and destruction. The construction of the binary “altemative/no-altemative” ensures the hegemony and dominance of political hope within the onto-existential horizon. The terror of the “no alternative”—the ultimate space of decay, suffering, and death—depends on two additional binaries: “problem/solution” and “action/inaction.” According to this politics, all problems have solutions, and hope provides the accessibility and realization of these solutions. The solution establishes itself as the elimination of “the problem;” the solution, in fact, transcends the problem and realizes Hegel’s *aufheben* in its constant attempt to sublate the dirtiness of the “problem” with the pristine being of the solution. No problem is outside the reach of hope’s solution—every problem is connected to the kernel of its own eradication. The politics of hope must actively refuse the possibility that the “solution” is, in fact, another problem in disguised form; the idea of a “solution” is nothing more than the repetition and disavowal of the problem itself.

The solution relies on what we might call the “trick of time” to fortify itself from the deconstruction of its binary. Because the temporality of hope is a time “not-yet-realized,” a future tense unmoored from present-tense justifications and pragmatist evidence, the politics of hope cleverly shields its “solutions” from critiques of impossibility or repetition. Each insistence that these solutions stand up against the lessons of history or the rigors of analysis is met with the rationale that these solutions are not subject to history or analysis because they do not reside within the horizon of the “past” or “present.” Put differently, we can never ascertain the efficacy of the proposed solutions because they escape the temporality of the moment, always retreating to a “not-yet” and “could-be” temporality. This “trick” of time offers a promise of possibility that can only be realized in an indefinite future, and this promise is a bond of uncertainty that can never be redeemed, only imagined. In this sense, the politics of hope is an instance of the psychoanalytic notion of desire: its sole purpose is to reproduce its very condition of possibility, never to satiate or bring

fulfillment. This politics secures its hegemony through time by claiming the future as its unassailible property and excluding (and devaluing) any other conception of time that challenges this temporal ordering. The politics of hope, then, depends on the incessant (re)production and proliferation of problems to justify its existence. Solutions cannot really exist within the politics of hope, just the illusion of a different order in a future tense.

The “trick” of time and political solution converge on the site of “action.” In critiquing the politics of hope, one encounters the rejoinder of the dangers of inaction. “But we can’t just do nothing! We have to do something.” The field of permissible action is delimited and an unrelenting binary between action/inaction silences critical engagement with political hope.

These exclusionary operations rigorously reinforce the binary between action and inaction and discredit certain forms of engagement, critique, and protest. Legitimate action takes place in the political—the political not only claims futurity but also action as its property. To “do something” means that this doing must translate into recognizable political activity; “something” is a stand-in for the word “politics”—one must “do politics” to address any problem. A refusal to “do politics” is equivalent to “doing nothing”—this nothingness is constructed as the antithesis of life, possibility, time, ethics, and morality (a “zero-state” as Julia Kristeva might call it). Black nihilism rejects this “trick of time” and the lure of emancipatory solutions. To refuse to “do politics” and to reject the fantastical object of politics is the only “hope” for blackness in an anti-black world.

III. Black Nihilism

Within critical discourses, black nihilism is saturated with negative semantics. Theorists consider it the bane of black existence and appropriate language and metaphors of the pathological to situate black nihilism outside of Ethics and moral law. Many describe it as a “disease of the soul” that produces callousness, meaninglessness, and masochism. Thus, the rhetorical maneuvers performed in this work attempt to foreclose a critical engagement with the term itself—to deprive the term of intellectual nourishment and precipitate its demise. I want to rescue the term

from this discursive annihilation and offer it up as the most significant philosophical perspective in the 21st century. This is certainly an audacious claim, but any critical analysis of black existence in the 21st century will have to contend with black nihilism—either reluctantly or otherwise. It is the inescapable interlocutor in every utterance about blackness; it demands an address. One cannot simply disregard the black nihilistic position as insane, naive, or irrational anymore—although these rhetorical maneuvers were successful in previous generations. The surd of anti-blackness requires a position outside the liberal grammar of bio-politics, futurity, and “hope” to limn the depth of black suffering. Black nihilism expresses discursively what black bodies endure existentially in an anti-black world (the “biopolitical grotesque”). The project of rescuing (or resuscitating) this term, which is the objective of this essay, is absolutely essential to understanding the “lived experience of the black,” as Fanon would have it.

Frederick Nietzsche is credited with the term “Nihilism” and describes it as particular crisis of modernity. The universal narratives and grounds of legitimization that once secured meaning for the modern world had lost integrity. In the absence of a metaphysical grounding of social existence, we were left with a void—a void that dispenses with metaphysical substance, even as this substance unsuccessfully attempts to refill this void. Nihilism, then, presents itself as the philosophical reflection of social decay; it offers politico-philosophical death (the death of ground) as the only “hope” for the world. Theorists often strip black nihilism of this philosophical significance and this, in my view, is a fatal error. When denuded of philosophical functionality, black nihilism becomes nothing more than a catalogue of “dysfunctional” behaviors. Behavior and philosophy are unmoored in this understanding of black nihilism, as if one is not the articulation of the other—they, indeed, “inter-articulate” each other. We might even suggest that the purported, dysfunctional behavior of the black nihilist is discourse by other means, when traditional avenues of articulation and redress are inadequate and inaccessible.

It is an existential angst that resembles “a kind of collective clinical depression” and a disease that resembles alcoholism and drug addiction. (29) It “can never be completely cured, and there is always the possibility of relapse.” (29) According to West, lovelessness, hopelessness, and meaninglessness are results of market forces and market moralities attenuating black institutions, weakening the armor that once provided protection against the pulverizing force of antiblackness. Black nihilism

indexes a devastating exposure to institutional, spiritual, and psychic violence against blacks.

Cornell West introduces black nihilism as a term to describe a crisis in black communities in *Race Matters* (1994). For him,

Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self- destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others (23).

Within this description of nihilism, however, there is a certain tension between grounding and ungrounding. Black institutions assert themselves as necessary ground, but are unable to secure this position, which leaves a void that capitalistic market forces are filling. This shifting of ground is a symptom of the metaphysical organization of life. The problem, then, is grounding itself. How do black institutions establish themselves as ground and by what process does this ground shift? It is precisely the establishment and shifting of ground that is the “meaninglessness” of which black nihilism rejects—it has no legitimacy other than its “own will to power.” If existential wholeness is predicated on the security of this ground, then black existence itself is always fractured and fragile. The shift of ground from black institutions to market forces indicates that social existence will also shift and bend with the various transitions. We have at the heart of West’s analysis an “ontology of coherence” that undermines itself; it assumes a coherent self that never existed, but is, instead, the fantasy construction of political hope and its grounding logic. In other words. West can only restore hope and meaning if he reestablishes a grounding for black existence, but as this crisis indicates, any such grounding is subject to shift, transform, or decay.² If we read this through Fanon’s analysis that blacks lack “ontological resistance,” we can say that black nihilism articulates the particular vulnerability of blacks to incoherence and fragility in an anti-black world.

Meaning itself is an aspect of anti-blackness, such that meaning is lost for the black; blacks live in a world of absurdity, and this existential absurdity *is* meaning for the world. Meaninglessness is really all there is (or we could say that “real” meaning for the world is utter meaninglessness). In an interview with Mark Sinker, Greg Tate

provided a reconceptualization of meaning when he stated, “the bar between the signifier and the signified could be understood as standing for the Middle passage that separated signification from sign” (Sinker, 1991). The very structure of meaning in the modern world—signifier, signified, signification, and sign—depend on anti-black violence for its constitution. Not only does the trauma of the Middle passage rupture the signifying process, but it also instantiates a “meaningless” sign as the foundation of language, meaning, and social existence itself. Following the work of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok (1986), we could suggest that the meaninglessness of anti-black violence is the “crypt-signifier” that organizes the modern world and its institutions. Any “meaning” that is articulated possesses a kernel of absurdity that blacks embody as “fleshy signs.” The “meaninglessness” that Cornel West bemoans is nothing more than the kernel of non-sense that an anti-black world attempts to conceal with its discourses of hope and futurity. What the black nihilist does is bring this meaninglessness to the fore and disclose it in all of its terroristic historicity.

For West, this crisis of meaning and hope can be rectified through the “politics of conversion” (we can read in this Kierkegaard’s idea of a “conversion experience”). This is deliverance from the bondage of market moralism, which results in the “politicization of love”—conceptualizing love as an organizing political principle (another spiritual principle appropriated by the Political). West identifies Toni Morrison’s masterpiece *Beloved* as an example of this ethic of love that converts the self-destructive nihilist. *Beloved* teaches us how to “generate a sense of agency among a downtrodden people.” (29) But West neglects the trauma that organizes this text and the nihilistic response to this trauma, as the only form of “agency” in an absurd antiblack world. Racial terror compels Sethe to leave the plantation with her children, and the threat her children could be re-captured and subjected to the horrors of the plantation motivates her to make a very heavy decision: the choice between prolonged social death or physical death. These are really the only choices that she has, and her ethic of love is to choose the latter—it is an act of mercy. We could say that Sethe becomes a nihilist in that moment of decision, and infanticide is not an irrational, pathological, or loveless act, but the ultimate testament of agency and love. This is what Paul D could not understand because it contravened the narratives of political hope and futurity; her act was read as cruel by those who attempted to translate the absurd “false choice” that structured her existence into a bio-political grammar of meaning. It is certainly

“inappropriate” to disregard this weighty decision as “loveless” or “hopeless,” for in doing so, we fail to understand the philosophical statement her action is articulating. This is a philosophical statement that understands the inadequacy of political hope in conditions of antiblack violence.

It is easy to disparage behavior that runs contrary to the dictates of a bio-political order. Black nihilism invites us to consider this behavior as a form of philosophical discourse that must be addressed. In separating the behavior from its philosophical statement, we not only run the risk of pathologizing forms of blackness, but also of foreclosing a particular critique of political hope that is absolutely necessary to understand black existential *angst* in the 21st century. In “Cornel West and Afro-Nihilism: A Reconsideration” (2001), Floyd W. Hayes offers an alternative reading of black nihilism that considers it a “reaction to the dominant culture’s nihilism” and a critique of anti-blackness. In Hayes’s masterful critique of West, he interprets this behavior as a form of *ressentiment*. Following Nietzsche and Scheler, Hayes argues that black *ressentiment* is a critique of metaphysical thinking, anti-black absurdity, and inequitable distribution of resources. It is a “historical and contemporary phenomenon” (251) that emerges during the trans- Atlantic slave trade and calcifies over time. These sentiments of anger, revenge, and rage engender rebellion, and what is often misinterpreted as black pathology. *Ressentiment*, then, is the meeting ground for an array of responses to anti-blackness, and it challenges the erroneous separation of behavior and philosophy. Black nihilism, in my analysis, acknowledges the persistence of *ressentiment*, but, unlike Hayes, posits no escape from it. The inability to ameliorate *ressentiment* is the essence of black suffering. *Ressentiment* constitutes torment without relief, and the desperation for relief results in forms of self-injury, in which the body must *speak* the existential crisis that gets muted within humanist grammars.

In *Hope on the Brink: Understanding the Emergence of Nihilism in Black America* (2013), theologian Lewis Brogdon would describe this theory of unresolvable torment as the “death of hope.” For Brogdon, this death is even more severe than West’s nihilism. This death is something that Brogdon mourns throughout the text with the assurance that it can be resurrected. The hope that he pines for is really political hope, for the hope that is lost is a hope in the efficacy of the Political to redress the injuries of anti-black violence. Brogden believes that the withdrawal of political hope leads to despair. Reflecting on this lost hope, Brogden suggests:

And today, the black community is increasingly populated by people whose hope in a just and equitable society either died a long time ago or continues to die as they face stifling social inequities and disappointing economic disparities. I heard a similar comment while teaching a study on why the church struggles with the issue of racism. One older congregant from the Civil Rights generation said, “We already heard that and tried that. Nothing has changed.” Instead of working for change, some blacks, like this congregant, choose to respond to the permanence of racial inequality by retreating from the struggle altogether, accepting the inequitable nature of society as permanent, after having one’s hope die a slow, painful death (42).

The challenge that the “older congregant” put to Brogden was a serious one. If Brogden admonishes her to keep political hope alive, then he must answer the question “why?” For this congregant, we have exhausted the discourses of humanism and the strategies of equality—nothing has worked. Brogden sidesteps this challenge by presenting “working for change” as a viable option, which is really a non-answer. What type of “work” will bring about the promises of the Political? Is there a type of work that will, once and for all, alleviate black suffering? Why would someone continue to do the same thing repeatedly without any substantial change (some would say this is the definition of insanity)? Brogden leaves these nihilistic questions unanswered, precisely because they are unanswerable, and, instead, continues to exhort blacks to struggle for the fantasy object. This struggle is presented as a spiritual virtue, and the spiritual concept of hope is contaminated with the prerogatives of a political order. This problematic conflation is never adequately explained. Why is continued hope in an anti-black political order a sign of spiritual maturity? And if this order is redeemable, then it is the obligation of the advocate to explain how this redemption will occur. This merging of the spiritual and the political creates a flawed theology that either endangers people or necessitates living in what Lewis Gordon would call “bad faith” in *Bad Faith and Anti-black Racism*. (1995) Perhaps it is the retreat from the Political that is the ultimate sign of spiritual maturity.

IV. Political Apostasy

For West and Brogden, nihilism is a spiritual-psychic disorder that requires a spiritual antidote. In this configuration of the spiritual, the nihilist is in need of deliverance—deliverance from the bondage of “hope-death.” We might, however, think of the nihilists not as the fleshly embodiment of “hope-death,” but as spiritualists invested in the deliverance of the spiritual from the clutches of the Political. The black nihilist, in this regards, is profoundly spiritual and addresses the contamination of the spiritual by its political sequelae. Unlike the political-theologian, the nihilist does not promise redress within the structure of the political, for this is impossible, but offers, instead, *rejection* of the political as a spiritual practice itself.³

In a very thought provoking discussion published in *Religious Dispatches* about the murder of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman’s acquittal, J Kameron Carter, Anthea Butler, and Willie James Jennings conceptualize anti-blackness as a form of spiritual idolatry. Evoking the seminal text *Is God a White Racist* (1973), written by Dr. William R Jones, these scholars suggest that anti-black political organization is often anchored in a racist theology—one that considers anti-blackness God’s will. Dr. William R Jones put the theodicy question to Black Liberation theologians and questioned this undying fealty to a liberation grounded in political reconfiguration and emancipatory rhetoric. *Is God a White Racist* not only articulates the disjuncture between emancipatory “hope” and the devastating reality of black suffering, but also questions the place of the Political within this liberation theology. This theology, indeed, presupposes certain metaphysical assumptions about the Political—progress, linear time, and agency—and Dr. William R Jones reveals a certain paradox within liberation theology: it is grounded in the Political, but lacks a strong political philosophy to justify this grounding (i.e. a philosophy that connects the theological to the Political). This becomes even more problematic because these metaphysical presumptions are themselves instruments of anti-blackness. Antiblackness, ironically, becomes the very foundation for the purported liberation from antiblackness in this theology. This is precisely the contradiction that Dr. William R. Jones intimates throughout the text, and it is this entanglement that renders political liberation somewhat of a ruse.

In the article “Christian Atheism: The Only Response Worth its Salt to the Zimmerman Verdict” (2013), J. Kameron Carter perspicuously foregrounds the problem

of the Zimmerman verdict as a perverse deification of anti-blackness. If the shooting of Trayvon Martin was “god’s will,” as Zimmerman expressed to Sean Hannity in an interview, then this god considered black death a moral imperative, or an act of righteousness, and Zimmerman, in shooting Trayvon Martin, assumed the role of the obedient disciple. For Kameron, this god is nothing more than an idol, a spiritual imposture created by modernity and its institutions:

The white, western god-man is an idol that seeks to determine what is normal. It is a norm by which society governs the body politic or regulates, measures, evaluates, and indeed judges what is proper or improper, what is acceptable citizenship. It is this idol, the idol of “the American god,” that is the symbolic figure Zimmerman identified himself with and in relationship to which he judges Trayvon Martin as, in effect, religiously wanting—wanting in proper citizenship, and ultimately wanting in humanity (3)

The “white, western-god-man” (or the “American god”) that Carter describes bears resemblance to what Sylvia Wynter would call “Man”—both are philosophical-theological apparatuses of anti-blackness, and they function to colonize essential spheres of existence (“Man” colonizes human and the “white, western-god-man” colonizes God). The “white, western-god-man” and “Man” index a process of extreme epistemological and metaphysical violence, and this violence serves as the foundation of western society and its politics. The only response to this epistemological and metaphysical violence, according to Carter, is atheism. It is here that we hear an uncanny resonance with Ernest Bloch’s *Atheism in Christianity* (1972), in which “a good Christian must necessarily be a good atheist.” True Christianity necessitates a certain atheism, in fact it depends on it, to fortify the boundaries between the just/unjust and the righteous/unrighteous. In other words, when a Christian encounters the idol of anti-blackness, she must assume an atheistic posture toward this idol to remain faithful (or as Carter would describe it to be “worth your salt”).

The atheism that Carter proffers, however, is entangled in the metaphysical bind that sustains the very violence his atheism is designed to dismantle. For him, this atheism entails “social, political, and intellectual struggle... struggle in solidarity with others, the struggle to be for and with others, the struggle of the multitude, the struggle that is blackness [as] the new ecclesiology ” (4) The term “struggle” here presents political metaphysics as a solution to the problem of anti-blackness—through labor, travail, and commitment one embraces progress and linearity as social

goods. With this metaphysics, according to Carter, we can “struggle to get rid of these ‘Stand Your Ground’ Laws that are in place in many states besides Florida, struggle against state legislatures (such as North Carolina’s) that are enacting draconian laws of various sorts, struggle in the name of the protection of women’s agency about their own bodies—in short, struggle to imagine a new politics of belonging.” (4) This struggle contains the promise of overcoming anti-blackness to usher in a “not-yet-social-order.” Again, the trick of time is deployed to protect “struggle” from the rigorous historical analysis that would demand evidence of its efficacy. The “not-yet-social-order,” situated in an irreproachable future (a political prolepsis), can only promise this overcoming against a history and historicity of brutal anti-black social organization. Carter is looking for a political theology—although we’ve always had one under the guise of democratic liberalism—that will provide conditions of life by mobilizing the discourses of hope and future temporality. The problem that this theology encircles, and evades, is the failure of “social justice” and “liberation theology” to dismantle the structure of anti-black violence; this brings us full circle to the problem that Dr. William R. Jones brilliantly articulated. Are we hoping for a new strategy, something completely novel and unique, that will resolve all the problems of the Political once and for all? If the Political itself is the “temple” of the idolatrous god—the sphere within which it is worshipped and preserved—can we discard the idol and purify the temple? Does this theology offer a political philosophy of purification that will sustain the “progress” that struggle is purported to achieve? In short, how does one translate the spiritual principle of hope into a political program—a political theology? The problem of translation haunts this theology and the looking-forward stance of the political theologian cannot avoid the rupture between the spiritual and the Political.

Can we reject this racist god and, at the same time, support the political structure that affirms this idol? Can we be “partial” atheists? This becomes a problem for Carter when he suggests that we abandon this idol, but fails to critique the structure of political existence, which sustains the power of this idol.” Atheism as imagined here would entail rejecting the racist- white-god, or a racist political theology, and replacing it with a just God, or an equitable political theology. Will replacing the idol with a more just God transform the political into a life- affirming structure for blackness? Unless we advocate for a theocracy, which is not what I believe Carter would propose, we need an answer to this question of translation. The answer to this

question is glaringly absent in the text, but I read this absence as an attempt to avoid the nihilistic conclusion that his argument would naturally reach. We might even suggest that one *must* assume a nihilistic disposition toward the Political if justice, redress, and righteousness are the aims. The problem with atheism, then, is that it relies on the Political as the sphere of redemption and hope, when the Political is part of the idolatrous structure that it seeks to dismantle. In this sense, Dr. William R. Jones becomes an aporia for Dr. Kameron Carter's text, if we read Jones as suggesting that black theology offers no cogent political philosophy, or political program, that would successfully rid the Political of its anti-black foundation. The Political and anti-blackness are inseparable and mutually constitutive. The utopian vision of a "not-yet-social order" that purges anti-blackness from its core provides a promise without relief—its only answer to the immediacy of black suffering is to keep struggling. The logic of struggle, then, perpetuates black suffering by placing relief in an unattainable future, a future that offers nothing more than an exploitative reproduction of its own means of existence. Struggle, action, work, and labor are caught in a political metaphysics that depends on black-death.

The black nihilist recognizes that relying on the Political and its grammar offers nothing more than a ruse of transformation and an exploited hope. Instead of atheism, the black nihilist would embrace *political apostasy*: it is the act of abandoning or renouncing a situation of unethicity and immorality—in this sense. The Political itself. The apostate is a figure that "self-excommunicates" him/herself from a body that is contrary to its fundamental belief system. As political apostate, the black nihilist renounces the idol of anti-blackness, but refuses to participate in the ruse of replacing one idol with another. The Political and God—the just and true God in Carter's analysis—are incommensurate and inimical. This is not to suggest that we can exclude God, but that any recourse to the Political results in an immorality not in alignment with Godly principles (a performative contradiction). The project to align God with The Political (political theology) will inevitably fail. If anti-blackness is contrary to our beliefs, selfexcommunication, in other words "black nihilism," is the only position that seems consistent.

We can think of political apostasy, then, as an *active nihilism* when an "alternative" political arrangement is impossible. When faced with the impossibility of realizing the "not-yet-social order," political apostasy becomes an empowered

hermeneutical practice; it interprets the antiblack Political symbolic as inherently wicked and rejects it both as critique and spiritual practice.

IV. Black Nihilism and Hermeneutical Nihilism

The Italian nihilist Gianni Vattimo has revived and developed the philosophical tradition of nihilism in gravid ways that speak to contemporary threats of annihilation and destruction.

His project is important because it permutes the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and in doing so, he not only offers an important critique of modernity, but also puts this critique in the service of a politico-philosophical imagination—an imagination that conceives of the weakening of metaphysical-Being (Nihilism) as the solution to the rationalization and fracturing of humanity (the source of modern suffering or pain). In short, this project attempts to restore dignity, individuality, and freedom to society by remembering Being (proper-Being, not metaphysical-Being) and allowing for the necessary contextualization and historicization of Being as event.

In *The End of Modernity* (1988) and *Nihilism & Emancipation* (2004), Vattimo reads Heidegger's destruction of ontology as a philosophical compliment to Nietzsche's declaration of the "death of God." Both Nietzsche and Heidegger offer trenchant critiques of metaphysics, and by reading them together, he fills in certain gaps, in particular, the relationship between metaphysics and social rationalization, foundations and Ontology, and sociological philosophy and thinking itself. We can understand both Vattimo's and Heidegger's project as the attempt to capture the relationship between what we might call metaphysical-Being (fraudulent Being as object) and Being (in its proper contextualized sense). This relationship, indeed, has been particularly violent and produced various forms of suffering—this suffering is the essence of metaphysics, or what Vattimo would call "pain," and it is sustained through the "will to power," violence (e.g. physical, psychic, spiritual, and philosophical), and the destruction of liberty. The metaphysical tradition has reduced Being, (an event that structures historical reality and possibility itself), to an object, and this objectification of Being is accomplished through the instruments of science and schematization. The results of this process is that Being is forgotten; the grand aper-

ture that has provided the condition for relationality for many epochs is now reified as a static presence, a presence to be possessed and analyzed. In this sense, we lose the grandeur of Being and confuse it for the particularity of a certain epoch, being. The nihilist, then, must overcome the oblivion of Being through the weakening of metaphysical-Being. Vattimo recovers Heidegger's term *Verwindung* (distorting acceptance, resignation, or twisting) as a strategy to weaken metaphysical Being, since the nihilist can never truly destroy metaphysics or completely overcome it (*Überwinden*). This strategy of twisting and distorting metaphysics helps us to re-member and re-collect (*An-denken*) the grandeur of Being (*Ge-Shick* as the ultimate gathering of the various epochal presentations of being) and to place metaphysical-Being back in its proper place, as a *particular manifestation* of this great historical process. Only by inserting our present signification of Being into the grand gathering of Being (*Ge-Shick*) can we properly contextualize our own epoch—the epoch of social rationalization, technocracy, metaphysical domination. (Vattimo 1988, 1-13)

Vattimo extends the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics to Politics and understand it as a particular metaphysical organization of existence. The logic of modernity “of linear time, a continuous and unitary process that moves toward betterment” (Vattimo 2004, 49-50) continues to dominate the Political field and serves as its foundation. It aims at a continuous perfection of metaphysical concepts. We can describe this movement as both a constant rediscovery/reengagement of metaphysical concepts and the upward movement to perfect these concepts. For Vattimo, however, once we have accomplished the nihilistic project of remembering (true) Being and weakening metaphysical foundations, we are left with an empowered hermeneutics. This hermeneutics, or what is also considered “ontological hermeneutics,” attempts to facilitate the “self-consumption” of metaphysical Being, so that there is nothing left to it. This “self-consumption” of metaphysics results in the dissolution of foundations, of first philosophies, and it presents incommensurability, conflict, and contingency as the “weak foundation.” In short, Vattimo thinks of metaphysical Being as a particular interpretation of Being; it establishes itself as irrefutable ground and silences, or extinguishes, competing interpretations of existence. The nihilistic project dissolves the hermeneutical foundation of metaphysics and enables conflicting interpretations to emerge. This interpretation of violence departs from the metaphysical usage of it, as a violation of innate rights or equality, and, instead, indicates “the preemptory assertion of an ultimacy that, like the ultimate metaphysical foundation,

breaks off dialogue and silences the interlocutor by refusing even to acknowledge the question ‘why?’” (Vattimo 2004, 98) Put differently, Vattimo’s foundation is the dissolution of all foundations—even this interpretation—and any “founding violence” that silences competing interpretations of existence. In doing so, he weakens metaphysical being and opens up the possibility of “projectionality”—the ability to engage in your unique project unencumbered by metaphysical strictures. Once this unencumbered projectionality is actualized, we understand “emancipation” as the freedom from metaphysical enclosures and the ability to interpret existence according to one’s own life-project.

For the black nihilist, however, the question is this: will the dissolution of metaphysical Being that Vattimo advances eliminate anti-black violence and redress black suffering? What would “emancipation” entail for black-objects (as distinct from the “human” that grounds Vattimo’s project)? Anti-blackness becomes somewhat of an unacknowledged interlocutor for Vattimo:

Philosophy follows paths that are not insulated or cut off from the social and political transformations of the West (*since the end of metaphysics is unthinkable without the end of colonialism and Eurocentrism*) and “discovers” that the meaning of the history of modernity is not progress toward a final perfection characterized by fullness, total transparency, and the presence of, and the presence finally realized of the essence of man and the world (Vattimo 2004, 35). [Emphasis mine]

Vattimo adumbrates a relationship between metaphysics and colonialism/Eurocentrism that renders them coterminous. If, as Vattimo argues, “the end of metaphysics is unthinkable without the end of colonialism and Eurocentrism”—which I will suggest are varieties of anti-black violence—then hermeneutical nihilism must advance an escape from anti-blackness to accomplish its agenda. Furthermore, if philosophy follows paths created by socio-political realities, then we must talk about anti-blackness not just as a violent political formation, but also as a philosophical orientation. The nihilist would insist that its hermeneutics would transform political reality and, concomitantly, eliminate black suffering. Ultimately, we rely on *An-denken* (thinking otherwise) to resolve the problem of asymmetrical power relations and the uneven distribution of resources that characterizes black suffering in the modern world. But how would a philosophical project translate into a political program or usher in the “yet-to-come” social unencumbered by metaphysics? Must we eradicate

anti-black violence *before* we can think otherwise? Or, to put this issue differently, can we think at all without anti-blackness?

For the Black nihilist, anti-blackness *is* metaphysics. It is the system of thought and organization of existence that structures the relationship between object/subject, human/animal, rational/irrational, and free/enslaved—essentially, the categories that constitute the field of Ontology. Thus, the social rationalization, loss of individuality, economic expansionism, and technocratic domination that both Vattimo and Heidegger analyze actually depend on antiblackness.⁴ Metaphysics, then, is unthinkable without anti-blackness. Neither Heidegger nor Vattimo explore this aspect of Being's oblivion—it is the literal destruction of black bodies that provide the psychic, economic, and philosophical resources for modernity to objectify, forget, and ultimately obliterate Being (non-metaphysical Being). We might then consider black captivity in the modern world as the “perfection” of metaphysics, its shameful triumph, because through the violent technology of slavery Being itself was so thoroughly devastated. Personality became property, as Hortense Spillers would describe it, and with this transubstantiation, Being was objectified, infused with exchange value, and rendered malleable within a socio-political order. In short, Being lost its integrity with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade; at that moment in history, it finally became possible for an aggressive metaphysics to exercise obscene power—the ability to turn a “human” into a “thing.” The captive is fractured on both the Ontological and ontic levels. This violent transubstantiation leaves little room for the hopeful escape from metaphysics that Heidegger envisions. Can the black-as-object lay claim to *Dasein*? And if so, how exactly does hermeneutic nihilism restore Being to that which is an object?

If we perform a “philosophy of history,” as Vattimo would advice, we understand that metaphysicians, and even those we now consider ‘post-metaphysicians,’ constructed the rational subject *against* the non-reasoning black, who, according to Hegel, Kant, Hume, and even Nietzsche was situated outside of history, moral law, and consciousness. (Bernasconi 2003; Judy 1991; and Mills 1998) It is not enough, then, to suggest that metaphysics engenders forms of violence as a necessity, as a bi-product; thinking itself is structured by anti-blackness from the very start. Any post-metaphysical project that does not take this into account will inevitably reproduce the very structures of thought that it would dismantle.

Hermeneutic nihilism provides a discursive frame to understand the intransigence of metaphysics as the residue of anti-blackness in the contemporary moment. The Black nihilist, however, must part ways with Vattimo concerning the question of emancipation. For Vattimo, hermeneutic nihilism avoids “passive nihilism” Passive nihilism is characterized by strands of fatalism or by melancholic nostalgia for lost foundations. To avoid this situation, Vattimo introduces hermeneutics as an alternative to passive nihilism, and conceives of hermeneutics as the natural result of an accomplished nihilism—namely, after the weakening of metaphysical Being, hermeneutics replaces metaphysics as a self-consuming “foundation.” He attempts to move beyond the metaphysical remnants found in the theories of Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Wittgenstein and think of hermeneutics as competing interpretations that reduce the violence of secure foundations. This of course provides the possibility for a radical democracy and a reconfiguration of Ethics, Law, and the Political. Ultimately, this weakening of metaphysical Being allows the human to project herself in the world, what Vattimo calls “projectionality,” and engage in the unique project that constitutes existence. This is the crux of emancipation for Vattimo. We, ironically, find ourselves back in the province of “progress,” “hope,” “betterment,” all the metaphysical instruments that constrain the very life that he would emancipate. This, of course, is unavoidable for he can only twist these concepts and reclaim them as part of a post- metaphysical agenda. Vattimo’s hermeneutic nihilism is not very much different than political-theology and democratic liberalism. It is a discourse of hope, a politics of hope, that advances the belief that we can weaken metaphysics and reduce suffering, violence, and pain. When it comes to black suffering, however, we are compelled to hold up the mirror of historicity and inquire about the possibilities of emancipation for the black-as-object. Anti-blackness is the residue that remains, the intransigent substance that makes it impossible to destroy metaphysics completely. The Black nihilist must confront this residue, but with the understanding that the eradication of this residue would *truly end the world itself*. Black emancipation is world-destructive; it is not an aperture or an opening for future possibilities and political reconfigurations. (Wilderson 2010) The “end of the world” that Vattimo envisions does not take into account that pulverized black bodies sustain the world—its institutions, economic systems, environment, theologies, philosophies, etc. Because anti-blackness infuses itself into every fabric of social existence, it is impossible to emancipate blacks without literally destroying the world. Moreover, this means that

black emancipation will not yield a new world or possibilities for reorganization—black emancipation is the nihilistic “solution” that would destroy the field of all possible solutions. In this sense, black emancipation becomes something like *death* for the world—with all its Heideggerian valences.

Black bodies and black suffering, then, pose a problem for emancipatory logic. If literal black bodies sustain modernity and metaphysics—through various forms of captivity, terror, and subjection—then what would emancipation entail for blacks? How do we allow metaphysics to self-consume and weaken when blackness nourishes metaphysics? (We can define the “problem” in W E B. Dubois’s poignant question “what does it mean to be a problem?” in the 20th century as metaphysics itself. Now we must ask: “what does it mean to be the *source* of metaphysics’ sustenance in the 21st century?”) Either the world would have to eliminate black bodies, which would amount to a self-destructive solution for all, or it would have to wrest blackness from the clutches of metaphysical anti-blackness that sustains the world. Our hope is that black emancipation would be accomplished through the latter, but history does not prove that this is possible—every emancipatory strategy that attempted to rescue blackness from anti-blackness inevitably reconstituted and reconfigured the anti-blackness it tried to eliminate. Anti-blackness is labile. It adapts to change and endlessly refashions itself; this makes emancipation an impossible feat. Because we are still attempting to mine the depths of anti-blackness in the 21st century and still contemplating the contours of this juggernaut, anti-blackness will escape every emancipatory attempt to capture it.

We are left, yet again, to place our hope in a future politics that avoids history, historicity, and the immediacy of black suffering. For this reason, the black nihilist rejects the emancipatory impulse within certain aspects of Black critical discourse and cultural/critical theory. In this sense, the modifier “black” in the term “black nihilism” indicates much more than an “identity”; a *blackened* nihilism pushes hermeneutic nihilism beyond the limits of its metaphysical thinking by foregrounding the function of anti-blackness in structuring thought.

V. Epistemology/Hermeneutic Nihilism

Black nihilism acknowledges that metaphysics is a destructive matrix, but it resists the temptation to believe that there is an alternative or a “beyond” the violence that sustains the world. For many, this could be read as fatalism or passive nihilism. The terms “passive” and “fatalism” applied to black nihilism are saturated with negativity to discredit its legitimacy; this discursive maneuver becomes another metaphysical strategy of disciplining and punishing “errant” thought. Despite these invectives and political hope’s “will to power,” black nihilism uses hermeneutics to return the political “dream” to its proper place—in the place of the void (Fanon). Black nihilism demands a traversal, but not the traversal that reintegrates “the subject” (and Being) back into society by shattering fundamental fantasies of metaphysics, but a traversal that disables and invalidates every imaginative and symbolic function. Its hermeneutics “blackens” the world, as Lewis Gordon suggests in “Theory in Black: Teleological Suspensions in Philosophy of Culture.” (2010)

The problem that confronts the black nihilist is one of epistemology, especially when the dominant epistemology privileges metaphysical forms of anti-black organizations of knowledge. The field of knowledge is uneven and reflects the asymmetrical power relations that sustain antiblack violence in modernity. The difficulty in expressing black nihilistic thought is that it is situated in the tense space between hermeneutics and epistemology. If we think of Epistemology as an anti-black formation, then every appeal to it will reproduce the very metaphysical violence that is the source of black suffering. Nihilistic Hermeneutics allows us to fracture Epistemology, to chip away at its metaphysical science, and to enunciate from within this fissure. Vattimo provides a cogent explanation of the distinction between epistemology and hermeneutics in his reading of Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Reflection* (1981): “epistemology is founded on the presumption that all discourses are commensurate with and translatable among each other, and that the foundation of their truth consists precisely in this translation into a basic language, that is, the one which mirrors facts themselves. Hermeneutics instead admits that there is no such single unifying language, and tries to appropriate the language of the other rather than translate into its own tongue.. .Epistemology is the discourse of normal science, while hermeneutics is discourse about as-yet-incommensurable discourses.” (Vattimo

1988, 149) Read through the register of anti-blackness, we can understand epistemology as the violent attempt at discursive and linguistic unification—the compulsion to establish a unifying ground of language. Because blackness is placed outside of the “customary lexis of life and culture,” as Hortense Spillers (1987) reminds us, blackness speaks an inassimilable language, an “anti-grammar” that resists linguistic/epistemological domination—what we call “translation.” Anti-black Epistemology is somewhat schizophrenic in its aim: it at once posits blackness as an anti-grammatical entity—paradoxically, a non foundation-foundation that provides the condition of possibility for its own existence—and at the same time, and in stunning contradiction, it forces a translation of this anti-grammar into a system of understanding that is designed to exclude it. This tension between grammatical exclusion and compulsory inclusion is part of the violence of captivity. A hermeneutical practice that acknowledges the impossible translation of blackness without forcing its annihilation (through translation/domination) is the only way we can understand the nihilist. Put another way, black nihilism shatters the coherence of anti-black epistemology, and cannot be “known,” or rendered legible, through traditional epistemology.

The problem that we encounter is that Black nihilism is reduced to an anti-black epistemology—the “illegible grammar” that speaks through the black body, psyche, and “spirit” is forcibly, and erroneously, translated into an epistemology that is inimical to its meaning. Black nihilism cannot be reduced to an anti-black foundation of knowledge (or metaphysics), and when this translation, this compulsory alignment of knowledge, fails to explain or understand the black nihilist, black nihilism is considered pathological and must be disciplined, contained, and, ultimately, destroyed. If all knowledge must submit to a bio-political imperative, then the socially dead object is always already situated at an impasse in relation to this imperative: either one lives in bad faith—the “optimistic” and politically hopeful belief that anti-black structures can be transformed to provide vitality to blackness, despite all evidence to the contrary—or one lives as the pathogen (i.e. socially pathological), and risks increased vulnerability to violent state apparatuses. In other words, the “pathological behavior” that West and Brogden bemoan as self-destructive, pessimistic, and apathetic from black youth is a gross misreading. Perhaps this “pathology” is a way of speaking otherwise when other forms of discourse are inaccessible; the nihilist might have to assume an anti-grammatical enunciation to express the inexpressible. West and Brogden subject this anti-grammar to an anti-black epistemology,

which mandates that all action must align with its bio-political imperative. When this forced translation fails, the nihilist is labeled “pathological,” “troubled,” “faithless,” “suicidal,” “fatalistic,” and “reckless.” Hermeneutical nihilism challenges this domination and allows incommensurate grammars to exist. The strategy of forced alignment—translation as domination—is a tool of the Political designed to preserve its metaphysical organization. Bio-politics will always fail the politically dead object because bio-politics depends on the politically dead black object to constitute itself. If political integration is the dream of the optimists, it will result in nothing more than what Achille Mbembe (2003) calls the “necro-political.” In this context, we can define necro-politics as the distribution of fraudulent hope that leaves the subject endangered.

VI. Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have argued that the Politics of hope preserve metaphysical structures that sustain black suffering. This preservation amounts to an exploitation of hope—when the Political colonizes the spiritual principle of hope and puts it in the service of extending the “will to power” of an anti-black organization of existence. The Politics of hope, then, is bound up with metaphysical violence, and this violence masquerades as a “solution” to the problem of anti-blackness. Temporal linearity, perfection, betterment, struggle, work, and utopian futurity are conceptual instruments of the Political that will never obviate black suffering or anti-black violence; these concepts only serve to reproduce the conditions that render existence unbearable for blacks. Political theologians and black optimists avoid the immediacy of black suffering, the horror of anti-black pulverization, and place relief in a “not-yet-but-is (maybe)-to-come-social order” that, itself, can do little more but admonish blacks to survive to keep struggling. Political hope becomes a vicious and abusive cycle of struggle—it mirrors the Lacanian drive, and we encircle an object (black freedom, justice, relief, redress, equality, etc.) that is inaccessible because it doesn’t really exist. The political theologian and black optimist, then, propose a collective *Jouissance* as an answer to black suffering—finding the joy in struggle, the victory in toil, and the satisfaction of ineffectual action. We continue to “struggle” and “work” as black youth are slaughtered daily, black bodies are incarcerated as forms of

capital, black infant mortality rates are soaring, and hunger is disabling the bodies, minds, and spirits of desperate black youth. In short, these conditions are deep metaphysical problems—the sadistic pleasure of metaphysical domination—and “work” and “struggle” avoid the terrifying fact that the world depends on black death to sustain itself. Black nihilism attempts to break this “drive”—to stop it in its tracks, as it were—and to end the cycle of insanity that political hope perpetuates.

The question that remains is a question often put to the black nihilist: What is the point? This compulsory geometrical structuring of thought—all knowledge must submit to, and is reducible to, a point—it is an epistemic flicker of certainty, determination, and, to put it bluntly, life. “The point” exists for life; it enlivens, enables, and sustains knowledge. Thought outside of this mandatory point is illegible and useless. To write outside of the “episteme of life” and its grammar will require a position outside of this point, a position somewhere in the infinite horizon of thought (perhaps this is what Heidegger wanted to do with his reconfiguration of thought). Writing in this way is inherently subversive and refuses the geometry of thought. Nevertheless, the nihilist is forced to enunciate his refusal through a “point,” a point that is contradictory and paradoxical all at once. To say that the point of this essay is that “the point” is fraudulent—its promise of clarity and life are inadequate—will not satisfy the hunger of disciplining the nihilist and insisting that one undermine the very ground upon which one stands.

Black nihilistic hermeneutics resists “the point,” but is subjected to it to have one’s voice heard within the market place of ideas. The “point” of this essay is that political hope is pointless. Black suffering is an essential part of the world, and placing hope in the very structure that sustains metaphysical violence, the Political, will never resolve anything. This is why the black nihilist speaks of “exploited hope,” and the black nihilist attempts to wrest hope from the clutches of the Political. Can we think of hope outside the Political? Must “salvation” translate into a political grammar or a political program? The nihilist, then, *hopes* for the end of political hope and its metaphysical violence. Nihilism is not antithetical to hope; it does not extinguish hope but reconfigures it. Hope is the foundation of the black nihilistic hermeneutic.

In “Blackness and Nothingness” (2013), Fred Moten conceptualizes blackness as a “pathogen” to metaphysics, something that has the ability to unravel, to disable, and to destroy anti-blackness. If we read Vattimo through Moten’s brilliant analysis, we can suggest that blackness is the limit that Heidegger and Nietzsche were really

after. It is a “blackened” world that will ultimately end metaphysics, but putting an end to metaphysics will also put an end to the world itself—this is the nihilism that the black nihilist must theorize through. This is a far cry from what we call “anarchy,” however. The black nihilist has as little faith in the metaphysical reorganization of society through anarchy than he does in traditional forms of political existence.

The Black nihilist offers political apostasy as the spiritual practice of denouncing metaphysical violence, black suffering, and the idol of anti-blackness. The act of renouncing will not change political structures or offer a political program; instead, it is the act of retrieving the spiritual concept of hope from the captivity of the Political. Ultimately, it is impossible to end metaphysics without ending blackness, and the black nihilist will never be able to withdraw from the Political completely without a certain death-drive or being-toward-death. This is the essence of black suffering; the lack of reprieve from metaphysics, the tormenting complicity in the reproduction of violence, and the lack of a coherent grammar to articulate these dilemmas.

After contemplating these issues for some time in my office, I decided to take a train home. As I awaited my train in the station, an older black woman asked me about the train schedule and when I would expect the next train headed toward Dupont Circle. When I told her the trains were running slowly, she began to talk about the government shut down. “They don’t care anything about us, you know,” she said. “We elect these people into office, we vote for them, and they watch black people suffer and have no intentions of doing anything about it.” I shook my head in agreement and listened intently. “I’m going to stop voting, and supporting this process; why should I keep doing this and our people continue to suffer,” she said. I looked at her and said, “I don’t know ma’am; I just don’t understand it myself.” She then laughed and thanked me for listening to her—as if our conversation were somewhat cathartic. “You know, people think you’re crazy when you say things like this,” she said giving me a wink. “Yes they do,” I said. “But I am a *free* woman,” she emphasized “and I won’t go back.” Shocked, I smiled at her, and she winked at me; at that moment I realized that her wisdom and courage penetrated my mind and demanded answers. I’ve thought about this conversation for some time, and it is this reason I had to write this essay. To the brave woman at the train station, I must say you are not crazy at all, but thinking outside of metaphysical time, space, and violence.

Ultimately, we must hope for the end of political hope.

Notes

¹ Defining the “spiritual” is a notoriously difficult task. The spiritual in this analysis is similar to what Fred Moten and Nahum Chandler would call “paraontology.” It exceeds and precedes political ontology. The spiritual escapes the confines of the Political and its organization, providing perhaps the only reprieve from the Political.

² The idea of the “ungrounding of ground” or the impossibility of a final/permanent ground is also expressed in the political philosophy of “post-foundationalism.” The ‘Political’ indexes the impossibility of final ground, and the political process is designed to fill in this vacuum. Oliver Marchart, *Postfoundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). The black nihilist, however, rejects the idea that the political difference (The Political vs. politics) provides any emancipatory relief from black suffering or possibility of a world without anti-blackness.

³ My use of the word “reject” here is very similar to the word “retreat” that Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy use in their seminal work *Retreating the Political* (1997). For them, retreating the political constitutes a critical questioning of the relationship between politics and philosophy, and this retreat enables us to reflect on the Political as a refusal to think—a retreat from thinking itself, when thinking is hijacked by metaphysical closure. I have something similar in mind with the term “rejection.” I envisage “rejection” as a critical posture toward the Political and its metaphysical, anti-black organization of existence.

⁴ The work of theorists such as Hannah Arendt (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*) Lindon Barrett (*Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of We stern Modernity*), and Denise Ferreira da Silva (*Toward a Global Idea of Race*) presents anti-blackness as a foundation for modern thought and political organization.

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The background of this image is a dark, heavily textured surface, possibly concrete or asphalt, showing significant wear, discoloration, and a large, jagged hole on the right side. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the rough texture and the edges of the hole.

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